

The Information Desk: the Library's Gateway to Service

Member libraries of the Association of Research Libraries were surveyed via a questionnaire to determine whether they had an Information Desk Librarian and, if so, the extent of services provided at such a reference point. The responses of the thirty-seven libraries offering this service were tabulated and formed the basis for ten guidelines listed at the conclusion of this study. It was hoped that these recommendations would be useful to libraries planning to establish this point of contact with the patron.

UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES today are experiencing the most rapid growth in their history. The publication explosion has resulted in the mushrooming acquisition of research material, a need for librarians to disseminate this material, and a resounding cry from library administrators for more and better facilities in which to house it.

These trends, greeted by some librarians with excitement and anticipation, have aroused negative feelings in others, for such an explosion in research can and does present many problems to academic libraries. Initially, these trends are increasing the complexities of providing good library service. Frequently, libraries, struggling under this tonnage of material, become so involved with the technical aspects of the problem that they possibly overlook the most important single factor of library service—the library user.

In considering the problems confronting university libraries in improving service to the user, it appears that the establishment of an information desk service would be an excellent means of providing more and better contact with the

patron. Many university libraries throughout the country having recognized this fact are striving to develop a point of contact which will introduce the user into the areas of the library from which he can derive the most benefit. Others have not yet experienced the need for such a service or have not recognized the necessity for it.

Research in library information services has seemingly overlooked the area of the information desk. A thorough search of *Library Literature* reveals that no recent articles have considered this subject. Possibly, this lack of study of such an area is a primary reason for many libraries having failed to recognize the values of this initial point of contact between the library and the user. This study hopes to focus attention on the possibilities of this service—a service which may have many names. For the purpose of this paper, it shall be referred to as the information desk.

In an effort to determine how many libraries had already instituted such a procedure, and the guidelines used for establishing the service, a questionnaire was devised and forwarded to seventy-three member libraries of the Association of Research Libraries. These libraries

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were surveyed because it was believed that they represent the types of libraries faced with large collections and complex library procedures which would create a demand for an information desk. Hence the intent of the compilation of this material was to set forth a policy by which large research libraries could develop their own information desk as future needs for such a service arise. It might be pointed out here that a number of ARL libraries not presently having this facility returned the questionnaire accompanied by letters reporting that plans were in process for establishing such a service. These libraries indicated a desire for further information on the subject.

The formulation of such a set of service guidelines was necessarily dependent on the type of information which could be gained from a questionnaire. Therefore, it was felt that information of a factual nature should be the primary concern and should form the basis of the guidelines. Fourteen of the fifteen questions required a response in fact rather than theory. The fifteenth question opened the way for comments from the participating libraries.

Also, as a semantics problem could arise because the term "information desk" is so general and can refer to anything from a receptionist's desk to a very specialized reference service, a need existed for a definition of the term. A cover letter accompanying the questionnaire defined the information desk as "a desk usually located near the card catalog or in an area readily available to patrons first entering the building. The person manning this desk usually performs duties in instructing patrons in the use of the library, providing miscellaneous information involving directions, etc., and offers limited ready reference service. Only a small collection of very general reference books are located at this desk. Due to the limited collection, only simple questions may be

answered. Questions of a more involved nature should be referred to the special reference areas. The Information Desk may also provide service in the Bibliography Collection should it be close at hand. However, I would like to exclude specialized or extensive reference service. In this way, I can set apart the duties of the Information Desk from the Reference Department."

The questionnaire was sent to the seventy-three libraries at the end of November 1967. The participating libraries were asked to complete the form and return it in January 1968. Of the seventy-three libraries queried, sixty-one responded, a response percentage of 83.7 per cent. The sixty-one responding libraries included thirty-seven libraries which had an information desk that fit the definition outlined in the cover letter. In order to clarify some discrepancies in the following figures, however, it should be noted that one of the participating libraries failed to answer all the questions, but did enter responses to the majority of queries. The information provided by the thirty-seven libraries with the information desk facility formed the basis for the recommended policies. A list of these participating libraries is included at the end of this study. The following report on the questionnaire includes all of the sixty-one that responded.

1. Do you have an information desk?

Yes	37
No	24

Even though twelve libraries did not return the questionnaire, slightly more than half the ARL libraries do provide this service.

2. Is it located near the card catalog in the main lobby?

All of the libraries providing this service agreed that this should be the location of the desk.

3. How is it staffed?

Librarians	27
Library assistants	7
Clerical employees	3

4. Is the desk staffed by:

One person on a full-time basis	9
Personnel alternating the hours	28

5. How many hours is it open daily?

Less than 6	1
6-8	12
8-10	4
10-12	8
more	11

The average hours of daily service proved to be nine. One library reported sixteen hours of service at this position.

6. Is simple reference service provided at this desk?

Yes	26
No	10

7. How many reference books are kept at the desk?

None	15
5-10	3
10-25	6
30-60	1
70-100	2
more than 100	10

Such a variety in the number of reference items housed at the desk indicates the extremes in reference provided by the participating libraries, running the gauntlet from absolutely no reference assistance to a considerable degree of it. Also, it should be pointed out that five of the fifteen libraries which reported no collection at the desk, stated they were in proximity to a reference collection and did not see the need for maintaining the tools at the desk. Hence, an average of ten to twenty-five books, based on a tabulation of the various sizes of the col-

lections rather than the number of libraries now having such a collection, seems to be the recommended number.

8. Are brochures, pamphlets, handbooks, maps distributed to the public at the desk?

Yes	28
No	9

9. Does your library have a telephone switchboard?

Yes	9
No	28

10. If no, does your information desk handle all incoming general library calls?

Yes	4
No	27

Some libraries felt they could not give an unqualified reply to this question. Therefore, six refrained from giving a direct answer.

11. Is simple telephone reference service provided at this desk?

Yes	29
No	8

12. Does your information desk staff member have any public relations duties, such as conducting tours, speaking to groups on library orientation, etc?

Yes	19
No	18

The opinions on this question seemed to be more divided than on any other in the questionnaire, and this is possibly as it should be. Whether or not the information desk librarian should have such duties can only be determined by the capabilities of the person filling this position.

13. An information desk attendant usually provides three types of informa-

tion: directional (where is such and such); instructional (use of card catalog and library); simple reference (either by phone or in person).

The libraries were then asked to provide an estimate as to the percentage of these types of questions answered at the desk, basing their percentage estimates on a 100 per cent total. This question provided the most problems in determining the manner in which to list the replies. In tabulating the estimates provided for this question, it appeared that for the percentages to be meaningful, it was necessary to present them in three different categories. It should also be pointed out here that although earlier in the questionnaire ten libraries stated that they offered absolutely no reference service at this desk, when asked to provide statistics, only six of the ten entered a 0 percentage on the statistical division. Also, it should be noted that the following statistics are based on those provided by only thirty-

six of the thirty-seven libraries having information desks, as one failed to respond to this question.

An average of all of the thirty-six participating libraries estimated percentages follows:

Directional	41 per cent
Instructional	37.3 per cent
Simple reference	21.7 per cent

The following percentages exclude the six libraries having information desks, but not providing any reference service:

Directional	40.59 per cent
Instructional	33.18 per cent
Simple reference	26.23 per cent

It also seemed that, with the figures available, it would be interesting to show the division of questions in libraries which appear to be making full use of their information desk service. To arrive at this figure, the nine libraries which reported less than 10 per cent reference questions were excluded along with the

LIBRARIES MAINTAINING INFORMATION DESKS

Boston Public Library
Boston University Library
University of Colorado Library
Harvard University Library
University of Illinois Library
University of Kentucky Library
Louisiana State University Library
University of Maryland Library
McGill University Library
Michigan State University Library
University of Michigan Library
University of Nebraska Library
University of Missouri Library
National Agricultural Library
National Library of Medicine
The Newberry Library
New York Public Library
Northwestern University Library
University of Notre Dame Library

Ohio State University Library
University of Oklahoma Library
Oklahoma State University Library
University of Pennsylvania Library
Pennsylvania State University Library
Princeton University Library
Purdue University Library
University of Rochester Library
University of Southern California Library
Syracuse University Library
University of Texas Library
Texas A & M University Library
University of Toronto Library
University of Utah Library
University of Virginia Library
University of Washington Library
Wayne State University Library
University of Wisconsin Library

aforementioned six. The percentages on this basis follow:

Directional . . .	30.51 per cent
Instructional . . .	35.01 per cent
Simple reference . . .	34.48 per cent

A study of these figures indicated that 59 per cent of the libraries having information desks are making full use of the potential such a service offers. The remaining 41 per cent have not yet recognized the extent to which such desks may be used to serve the patron. And 16 per cent of this latter division are merely using the desk as a directional device.

14. Bearing in mind the type information provided by this desk, what do you believe the occupational status of the attendant should be?

Librarian	25
Library assistant	9
Clerical	1
Two libraries did not specify.	

The responses to this question showed that there was little variation in the present staffing of the position from what would be preferred. A comparison of the preferences shown here to the actual staffing policies revealed in question 3 substantiates this statement.

With the growth of the university student body, constantly on the climb because of the continuing population explosion, it appears that university libraries are going to be increasingly pushed to make provisions for such a service as the information desk. And, in considering the establishment of such a service in the library, its assets, not only to the students but to new faculty members, cannot be overlooked. The initial contact by the information desk librarian with new faculty members can create an improved climate for cooperation between the library and the faculty which

is so important to good academic relationships.

Bearing these ideas in mind and also the compilation of information obtained from the questionnaire, it seemed that this study would not be complete without the formulation of tentative guidelines for the establishment of such a facility. Recommendations for such guidelines follow.

1. The information desk should be located near the card catalog which is preferably situated adjacent to the main lobby of the library.

2. It should be staffed by librarians.

3. An information desk librarian should be named to supervise the service, but should not be expected to devote the thirty-five- to forty-hour work week to this position. Such a librarian could be in the reference department in another area of the library, but that librarian should be responsible for the smooth operation of this service which is, after all, an extension of reference.

4. The information desk librarian should personally staff the desk at specified hours, but the remainder of the desk's hours should be alternated with other librarians. The length of time spent at the desk must be determined by the staff available at the library initiating the service.

5. The desk should be staffed a minimum of nine hours daily. These hours need not be in succession but should be arranged to provide service during peak hours.

6. Simple reference should be provided at this desk if it is to fulfill its function as a useful library service. Depending upon its proximity to the general reference desks, this should be supported by a collection of from ten to twenty-five very carefully selected reference tools. This small collection should be frequently scrutinized to insure that the librarian is able to provide a maximum

of service from a minimal collection. Deadwood must not be allowed to collect.

7. Brochures, pamphlets, handbooks, maps, or any other literature concerning the library should be distributed at this point.

8. The information desk is not a telephone switchboard for the library and should not be used as such. The telephone duties might naturally include a number of misdirected calls, however; this occurs in all parts of the library. It should be a part of the information desk librarian's duties to direct the callers to the proper department.

9. Simple telephone reference service and card catalog information should be

provided here. More difficult reference questions can be referred to the proper area from this point.

10. The librarian who is assigned the position of supervising the information desk should be a person qualified in the area of public relations. The library should always bear in mind that the information desk is frequently the first point of contact with student and faculty and that first impressions, if unfortunate, are often difficult to dispel. Such a person should be able to conduct tours and to speak to groups on library orientation. The first duty of the information desk librarian is to inform the patron, and this librarian should be suited to such a role. ■ ■

